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SUBJECT: 25 YRS LATER: MUBARAK VISITS INDIA

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a four day visit to India marked more by pomp and ceremony than solid results, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak signed a number of technical agreements and promised to establish a Foreign Minister-level strategic dialogue. He also formally received the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding, awarded to him in 1995. Mubarak's large business delegation had substantial interaction with Indian counterparts, building confidence for increased trade. The Indian MEA gave a positive assessment of the visit, characterizing it as a continuation of good relations and downplaying the inertia of recent decades. Embassy interlocutors indicated they thought the deliverables were light, but that the symbolism of the visit marked a brighter future for India-Egypt political relations, trade and economic cooperation. END SUMMARY.

The deliverables

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12. (C) Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak arrived in New Delhi on November 16 -- the first visit by the Egyptian leader in 26 years -- for a four day visit at the invitation of Prime Minister Singh. Mubarak brought a delegation of 150 senior officials and businessmen, including Foreign Minister Ahmend Aboul Gheit, Information Minister Anass Ahmend Nabih El-Fiqqi, Minister of Communication and Information Technology Dr. Tarik Mohamed Kamel Mahmoud, and Minister of Trade and Industry Rasheed Mohamed Rasheed. The visit produced several technical agreements and an understanding to establish a strategic dialogue between Foreign Ministers. Among the agreements signed were an extradition treaty, an agreement to abolish visa requirements for diplomatic personnel, an MOU on cooperation in the fields of health and medicine, an MOU on cooperation in the exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes, and an MOA on trade and technical cooperation. (NOTE: The complete text of the joint statement can be found at <http://meaindia.nic.in> under "press releases" END NOTE). Summing up the official GOI assessment, PM Singh declared that the visit "opened a new chapter in our relations.... We have agreed to make up for lost time."

Support for the Palestinian Cause

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13. (C) With India's flourishing relations with Israel remaining conveniently in the background, PM Singh and President Mubarak signaled unified support for the Palestinian cause. During remarks to the press, PM Singh

praised President Mubarak's role in the Middle East Peace Process, reiterated India's support for Palestine and the Arab Peace Plan, and linked Middle East stability to India's strategic interests in the region. Not coincidentally, Mubarak's arrival in India was met with a statement by an External Affairs Ministry spokesperson condemning violence in Gaza, saying "There can be no justification for the denial of essential supplies including such as food and fuel to the civilian population of the Gaza strip numbering over 700,000 persons."

A nod to the NAM, but not to the UNSC

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¶4. (C) PM Singh congratulated President Mubarak on Egypt's upcoming chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement, agreeing to work closely on challenges facing developing countries such as the global financial crisis, energy security, climate change and terrorism. President Mubarak put the two countries' participation in the NAM and other international fora in the context of their shared values and historic friendship, calling for solidarity in serving the interests of developing countries. Noticeably absent from Mubarak's visit -- something which had become a boilerplate insertion in joint statements with most visitors to Delhi -- was explicit support for India's quest for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Mubarak noted to the Times of India that Egypt also seeks a permanent UNSC seat, and merely commented that he did not envision

expansion occurring "in the foreseeable future because of the well-known positions of the current permanent members."

MEA pleased with "successful" visit

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¶5. (C) Deputy Secretary (West Asia and North Africa) Dr. Suhel Ajaz Khan told PolOff that the most important aspect of the visit was simply that Mubarak came after a 26 year absence, saying the visit showed a renewed desire by both countries to strengthen the bilateral relationship. Khan highlighted the agreements signed and the joint declaration, and observed that the Egyptian business delegation and Indian business community had a good interaction that will encourage both sides to move toward increased bilateral trade, currently in the \$3 billion range. Khan asserted that while Mubarak had not visited India in many years, there has been much India-Egypt contact including official visits at lower levels and three Prime Minister visits from India to Egypt: Rajiv Gandhi, Inder Kumar Gujral, and P.V. Narasimha Rao.

What took so long?

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¶6. (C) Commenting on the lengthy gap between visits by an erstwhile friendly country's president, Professor of West Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University P.R. Kumaraswamy opined that Mubarak has been "skipping" India because for many years each countries' interests lay elsewhere. Kumaraswamy explained that India's Middle East policy had been historically Egypt-centric, even after 1967, but Iraq became more relevant to India after President Nasser was marginalized. Saddam Hussein was a secular, nationalist, pro-Soviet leader, and Iraq provided the bulk of India's oil. Since then, Kumaraswamy said, Mubarak has been occupied with fixing Egypt's image in the Arab world, with South Asia not high on his priorities. Additionally, India's normalization of relations with Israel in 1991 caused a rift in India-Egypt relations which then suffered from inertia. "Egypt finds it hard to accept that it is a normal country like everyone else," said Kumaraswamy. "When India's relations with the Middle East were more political, Egypt was more important to India. Now that relations are more practical, Egypt is less important, not even on par with Israel." Kumaraswamy added that, more recently, preoccupation with the U.S.-India Civil-Nuclear Initiative caused India's government to neglect relations with many countries including even important, energy supplying countries in the Middle East.

Why now?

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¶9. (C) Other Middle Eastern and Gulf countries have recognized India's growing importance during the past quarter century and now Egypt "wants in on the benefits" of a better relationship, said Kumaraswamy. Professor Qamar Agha of Jamia Millia Islamia told PolOff that Egypt has felt "left out," and pointed out that Egypt is important in the Arab world and could be a gateway to Africa for India, possibly allowing India to balance China's growing influence there. India's trade with Egypt has been growing rapidly in recent years, and Indian companies are exploring two oil fields recently discovered in Egypt. He opined that just as India is realizing it needs a gate into Africa, Egypt is realizing that it needs access further into Asia.

India's motivation: economics

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¶10. (C) PM Singh was scheduled to visit Saudi Arabia prior to Mubarak's India trip, but postponed his visit for the November 15 G-20 meeting in Washington. Agha speculated that this schedule shift may also have to do with India's desire to place Egypt a bit higher on the totem pole, and possibly gives India more to work with when Singh next meets King Abdullah. "India doesn't want Saudi Arabia

as a major power with Egypt as just a sidekick. There is too much Pakistani influence in Saudi Arabia," said Agha. He continued by saying that he expects the political relationship between India and Egypt to grow, as the two countries no longer have many major political differences. According to Kumaraswamy, "India doesn't have a regional policy on the Middle East because our interests in different countries are not the same. The only way it would work would be to sort them into those who support the peace process and those who don't. But for now, our policy is driven by economics."

Military cooperation, coming up - but never nukes

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¶11. (C) Agha told PolOff that Egypt is in need of Soviet-era spare parts for its military equipment, and that it would be cheaper and easier to get them from India than from Russia. He anticipates that in addition to such sales there will be increased military cooperation between India and Egypt. "The military is the most important institution in non-democratic countries, especially if people-to-people ties are good, as they are with Oman and Qatar (NOTE: India recently signed security cooperation agreements with both countries). Democracy is not on the way in these countries. We support it, but need to deal with the countries' existing governments. All of our neighborhood is like this." Agha said that there is pressure from India's private sector to allow cooperation on building civilian nuclear power plants and refurbishing Egypt's two existing, older plants. However, consistent with India's strong non-proliferation policy and with Egypt's own desire for a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Middle East, India does not support a nuclear Egypt.

¶12. (C) Comment. The symbolism of Mubarak's visit was significant, even if the substance wasn't. Mubarak's long absence from India, highlighted by the fact that he had never come to pick up the prestigious Nehru award he was honored with in 1995, had been seen as a snub by Delhi, but this visit appears to have put Mubarak -- and Egypt -- back in a positive light. The visit had other benefits for the ruling Congress party, starting with reinforcing for the Indian public the perception that India is a player in the Middle East Peace Process, able to work side by side with Egypt to advance the Palestinian cause. Additionally, by hosting Mubarak as India's election season begins to heat up, Congress once again checked the box as a friend of its important Muslim constituency. And while an Egyptian Embassy contact here admitted that Delhi and Cairo see each other as competitors for a UNSC seat, this visit did demonstrate their willingness to work together as leaders

in south-south and non-aligned cooperation. The success  
for India of this visit is that a long-dormant relationship  
appears to have been reinvigorated.

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